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ABSTRACT

Stories from oral tradition such as legends, myths, and fairy tales may more fully describe reality than any newscast for young children. As Bruno Bettelheim points out, stories meet the psychological need of all human children. The Yakima Indian legend "When Mosquitos Ate People" can be used in a flannel board story telling setting with young children. In the story the mosquito man is a giant whom children may see as representing adults and the coyote is small, but his cunning allows him to defeat the monster. This legend touches the child's perception of himself or herself and the relationship of the child to the world. Many stories, such as this one, deal with seeing through the eyes of different animals, altering a listener's perception and serving to round out one's personality. By placing the story in an earlier time, the problem of confusing the actions taking place in the legend with reality is removed. Traditionally the manner of story telling deals with instilling certain cultural values and concepts. American Indian stories are told in a cycle or when the time is appropriate, and constantly referred to illustrate points that the child should remember to modify his or her behavior. Indian story collections that may be used in the classroom include the "NW Indian Readers Series," "Grandfather Stories of the Navahos," "Son of Raven, Son of Deer," and "Wo Ya-Ka-Pi." (MKM)

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COYOTE IN THE CLASSROOM:
The Use of American Indian Oral Tradition with Young Children

by
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Ana Chush Isucha
Son'ahchi
Once Upon a Time

Each one of these phrases opens expectations for a particular culture. They are part of a ritual for the Sahaptin, Zuni and English speaking peoples. In terms of oral traditions, all three phrases refer to a time that is not now. The significance of this time distinction will be discussed later.

The stories that these words introduce are what the Zuni people call "*Telapnaawe*," stories that in English, we might call "fiction." There are other terms that introduce what are recognized as stories believed to be true--historical accounts. To understand this, consider how the phrase, "In the news tonight..." puts you in the mood to hear Walter Cronkite describe an increase in gasoline prices.

English is a difficult language to use in conveying certain concepts. Take, for example, the connotations of the words "legends, myth, fairy tale, story." All imply something that is not true--something out of contact with reality. What the non-Indian community needs to understand is that these stories may more fully describe reality than any newscast, especially in relation to young children.

Young children do not perceive the world as adults. As Ellen Wartella has stated:

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> Adult perceptions of children have changed radically since the court of Louis XIV when children were dressed and regarded as miniature adults. Anyone who has observed a five-year-old and his 10-year-old sibling talking while watching television can intuitively recognize that children think differently and communicate differently. The "adjustment" of most adults in the way we talk to children reflects our strong intuition that they are not miniature adults.[1]

What's the earliest memory you have? How old were you? You simply don't recall much from your early childhood because you thought differently in those days than you do now. Your earliest memories were encoded in a manner so different you no longer have access to them, except for an occasional, powerful moment usually associated with something emotional.

In working with traditional oral stories, we are dealing with words heard by generations of children (and adults). Imagine, if you will, a pebble worn smooth by its interaction with a stream. A traditional story is like that--washed by the stream of time until what is not essential to it has been washed away. To become part of the rich oral traditions of a native culture, the story has to speak to children in a language he or she understands...and there is a child in all of us.

Famed child psychologist, Bruno Betthelheim in his book, The Uses of Enchantment, relates:

> For a story truly to hold the child's attention, it must entertain him and arouse his curiosity. But to enrich his life, it must stimulate his imagination; help him to develop his intellect and to clarify his emotions; be attuned to his anxieties and aspirations; give full recognition to his difficulties, while at the same time suggesting solutions to the problems which perturb him. In short, it must be one and the same time relate to all aspects of his personality--and this without ever belittling, but, on the contrary, giving full credence to the seriousness of the child's predicta-ments, while simultaneously promoting confidence in himself and in his future.[2]

Remember that Bettelheim is not addressing the nature of an Indian child, but the psychological needs of all human children. (Think of Bettelheim's statement in relation to the enormous acceptance of the movie, "Star Wars.") In the United States, the Native American population has perhaps maintained its oral traditions and kept its stories alive better than most groups, such as the descendents of Europeans who have fossilized their own oral traditions in the form of written "fairy tales".

At the risk of overemphasizing my point, I must again repeat that the term "fairy tale" is not a satisfactory translation of Native American oral traditions. Not all Native oral traditions are properly classified as fiction. Indeed, all Native languages I am familiar with make a strong distinction between those stories created to educate and enlighten and those stories repeated for their historical significance.

Let's look closely at a particular story from the Pacific Northwest in light of its meaning to children. It is often difficult to trace the origin of any one story. Through trade, intermarriage, gift, happenstance, or even theft, stories are passed down. Traditionally, stories are possessions just as your car or your clothes are possessions, and not everyone had or has the right to tell them. This legend is from the Yakima Indians of Eastern Washington state. I've adapted it for use with young children on a flannel board.

In using this story, I have never lost the attention of youngsters or had a "bad" audience. I include it in this particular form as a curriculum piece you can try in your own classroom. While traditionally we never used flannel boards in story telling, some native cultures have traditionally used such

devices as "story knives," masks, unusual clothing, etc., to heighten the dramatic impact of a story. The original legend is, of course, much longer, but involves certain cultural elements that would have to be expalined to non-Yakima, and even urban-Yakima, children, so I have attempted to retain its most important elements in my adaptation.

WHEN MOSQUITOS ATE PEOPLE - FROM THE YAKIMA INDIANS

Needed for Flannel Board Story

One set of legs, breechcloth, and moccasins
One skinny mosquito man torso with long sharp nose
One torso with stomach bulge
One torso with large stomach
One torso with huge stomach
One torso with enormous stomach
One doorframe in green with serrated edges to show thorns
One coyote
Assorted animal people

As the story is told, the appropriate torso is placed on the set of legs. I normally will go through the legend once and then ask the children to tell the legend to me. This allows me to check on their understanding. I recall telling a legend about the ant fasting, because fasting is a form of prayer for some tribes. Imagine my chagrin when I heard a 7-year-old calmly relate that the ant prayed fast. Using the flannel board also allows young children to develop their manipulation skills. I recall using this same story with a reservation headstart program and seeing the sense of accomplishment of a child with Down's syndrome as he took his turn in adjusting the flannel figures while the children were retelling the legend to me.

Narrator: Long time ago there was a terrible monster called the Mosquito Man. He was a giant who had a big nose that he used to spear people and suck out their blood. All the people were afraid of him.

Mos. Man: Blood soup...I'm hungry for Blood soup.

Animals: What should we do? The Mosquito Man will eat us! Someone save us!

Narrator: Coyote heard the people and decided to help them.

Coyote: To save you we must ask the help of the Plant people. All of the plant people with thorns...the thistles, the wild roses, the blackberries,

Will you help protect us from the Mosquito Monster?

Plants: We will help you.

Narrator: And so the people gathered branches and thorns from all the plant people. They hung them around the door in the longhouse where the different people lived.

Coyote: Now we must call the Mosquito Man to us.

Mos. Man: Blood soup...I want some blood soup.

Animals: Mosquito Man, Mosquito Man...Come have dinner with us. We invite you to a feast. We'll have blood soup.

Mos. Man: A feast? A feast?

Animals: Come with us.

Mos. Man: What a strange door you have on your long house.

Coyote: It is very beautiful with roses and berries and thistles, isn't it?

Mos. Man: I'm hungry.

Animals: Here's some blood soup. Eat all you want.

Narrator: Then the Mosquito Man ate all the blood soup in the huge bowl he had been given.

Mos. Man: Delicious Soup. Wonderful Soup.

Animals: There's more. Have some more.

Narrator: The animal people brought out more blood soup. The Mosquito Man ate and ate. Soon his tummy began to stick out.

Mos. Man: Delicious Soup. Wonderful Soup.

Animals: What a wonderful appetite you have to be so hungry. Have some more blood soup.

Narrator: The Mosquito Man continued to eat. More and more blood soup was brought out by the animal people. Even as they watched, the Mosquito Man's tummy began to grow and grow.

Mos. Man: Delicious Soup! Wonderful Soup!

Animals: More! Have some more blood soup!

Narrator: Bigger and bigger the monster's tummy became. Still the animal people brought out more soup for him.

Mos. Man: Delicious Soup! Wonderful Soup! More! More!

Narrator: Finally the Animal people knew it was time.

Coyote: Now everyone! Everyone run from the Mosquito Man!

Mos. Man: Where are you going! You can't get away from me. I'll catch you and make you into more Blood soup!

Narrator: Coyote and the other people ran as fast as they could out the door. The Mosquito Monster came after them, but he was now so fat he could no longer run.

Mos. Man: I'll get you. You can't get away from me!

Narrator: But the Mosquito Man was so fat now he couldn't fit through the door anymore. His fat tummy hit the sharp thorns of the door and he exploded. He burst apart into the little mosquitos we still have to today. The mosquitos can't kill you anymore, but they can sure make you itch.

* * *

Why do children (and adults) enjoy this legend so much? Remember that a legend is retold within the Indian community year after year. It is not simplified (as I have simplified this story for the flannel board) for a child's sake. Until the bowdlerizing of Christian missionaries, legends were not "cleaned up" by eliminating references of sexual or bodily nature. Rather the audience changed while the story remained the same. A young child could simply not fully understand the sexual elements until it was time for him or her to do so. As the maturity of

the audience increased, the perceptions of the story altered and expanded revealing new levels of meaning.

For the young child, the story of the Mosquito Man is an exciting one, but it is speaking to the youngster in a very fundamental way. The Mosquito Man is a giant. What are adults in size relation to a child?

Relating a case history, Betthelheim tells of a mother who read:

> ..."Jack and the Beanstalk" to her five-year-old. His response at the end of the story was, "There aren't any such things as giants, are there?" Before the mother could give her son the reassuring reply which was on her tongue--and which would have destroyed the value of the story for him--he continued, "but there are such things as grown-ups, and they're like giants." At the ripe old age of five, he understood the encouraging message of the story: although adults can be experienced as frightening giants, a little boy with cunning can get the better of them.[3]

In size relation to the Mosquito giant, Coyote is small, but his cunning allows him to defeat the monster. Observe, too, how the Mosquito Man is defeated--not killed, but transformed from a deadly, invincible enemy to a small annoyance that the smallest human child can overcome with a single handslap. Recall Betthelheim's earlier description of how a story holds a child's attention by "giving full credence to the seriousness of the child's predicaments, while simultaneously promoting confidence in himself and in his future.

Certain symbolism can be read into the blood soup (the animal people contribute something of themselves to continue their own lives) but one must recall from a cultural standpoint, Blood soup is a nutritious culinary delight for numerous tribes. More important is the involvement of the plants in defeating the monster. The people cannot overcome the giant by themselves--it is only when they achieve unity with another part of nature, that they can achieve their purpose.

This concept of the unity of various elements is an essential part of Native American tradition. Many of the stories deal with seeing through the eyes of different animals, and in so doing, achieving altered perceptions that serve to "round out" one's personality. A person who constantly stays fixed in one mode of perception is incomplete and is unable to function to his or her full capacity. Life itself is not fixed in one mode. These animal eyes are metaphysical representations, that communicate very well to the right side of the brain. This point should be of special consideration for research in cerebral dominance theory. Thus, we are not working with simple children's stories, but a culture's method of providing enlightenment to a part of the individual seldom approached by conventional non-Indian education.

We can therefore see that a legend like the Mosquito Monster touches a child's perception of him/herself and the relationship of the child to the world. Understand, too, that for the young child, the world is a dangerous place. In the story, death in the form of the monster is a natural part of the world, just as in the everyday world, fast automobiles, stairs, scalding water, etc., are constant threats. But the story teaches that threats can be handled--not quickly, not easily, but with the proper actions and patience.

As I mentioned at the beginning of the article, by placing the story in an earlier time (long, long ago), we remove the problem of confusing actuality of the everyday with the actions taking place in the legend. This safeguard does not happen with the excessively realistic stories that have been in vogue for children for the last two generations. The contemporary Indian child does not have to worry about being attacked by a Mosquito Monster when he/she steps outside. After seeing a movie about earthquakes, infernos or floods, the child

would walk out into daylight and see the same buildings, pavement and automobiles that were just destroyed and have good reason for being afraid.

Understand that in preceeding examination of this simplified legend, we are confining ourselves to only a small part of its original meaning. Imagine describing a rainbow by confining yourself to talking about yellow. But by analyzing legends from a psychological and educational standpoint, administrators feel better about letting them into the classroom. Suddenly they aren't simply children's stories, but curriculum materials.

Traditionally, the manner of storytelling--its timing, as well as its content, also deals with instilling certain cultural values and concepts for which there are no equivalents in English. Stories are told when the time is appropriate and not because 11:30 a.m. is circle time. Stories are constantly referred to in order to illustrate points the child should remember or to modify his/her behavior. Traditionally stories were told in a cycle, so that many, many different stories were heard during the seasons (winter time is almost universally the proper storytelling time for Native American people). This is beneficial because the emotional development of one child is different from his/her neighbor. One child may need a parent centered story to better understand his/her present home situation, while another more independent child would better benefit from a legend dealing with a character involved with leaving home to seek his/her destiny.

Finally, one must understand what storytelling is all about. It is a ceremony in itself. Indian people have long understood the power of words and images.

A true storyteller reaffirms and recreates reality in his or her actions. Storytellers give part of themselves to their audience. Most teachers lost this understanding of their students when they started lecturing. When you read from a book, the book speaks to the child. They aren't your words and the child knows it. When you show a film, its images aren't yours and not those of the child. The child's imagination is not challenged into growing by letting him/her picture what characters look like; how they move; how they dress.

I urge you...Tell a story. Experience it. Indians have no monopoly on oral traditions. Look to your own heritage and memorize one of your own people's stories to share with children and give them that part of yourself that grows by sharing. There are many fine anthologies of Indian legends available that all children will enjoy.

I suggest you look to those that are tribally initiated or approved, such as the NW Indian Readers Series; Grandfather Stories of the Navahos; or We-Gyet Wanders On.

You will also benefit from those stories collected by Indian individuals like George Clutesi in his Son of Raven, Son of Deer, or Wo Ya-Ka-Pi, by Gilbert Walking Bull. Understand, however, that our stories were never created for a printed page. Ink robs them of the songs, gestures and intonations that are so much a part of them. But allow Coyote into the classroom. He's sly. He may never leave.

1. Ella Wartella, Ed., Children Communicating: Media and Development of Thought, Speech, Understanding, Sage Annual Review of Communications Research, Vol. 7, Bevery Hills, 1979, page 7.

2. Bruno Bettelheim, The Uses of Enchangement: The Meaning and Importance of Fairy Tales, Alfred A. Knopf, New York, 1976, page 5.

3. Ibid. page 27.

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